The Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance (MWA) is a bi-state coalition of over 800 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing the New York and New Jersey waterways. Our waterways are alive with economic activity, active recreation, environmental education, and waterborne transportation, particularly critical to our region’s emergency preparedness on our island metropolis.

**When catastrophe strikes, ferries have provided a crucial first response.** Ferries have consistently proven to be the most resilient mode of transit and evacuation during and after emergencies, lacking reliance on either a fixed route or the electrical grid. On September 11, 2001, the largest maritime evacuation in history safely rescued 500,000 people out of Manhattan. In August 2003, hundreds of thousands more returned home by ferry following the largest blackout in American history. And in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, which crippled our transportation infrastructure, ferries provided immediate relief. With roads, tunnels, subways, and commuter rails out of commission, ferries quickly became a critical component of urban mobility, restoring service soon after Sandy. NY Waterway restored trans-Hudson service on the day after the storm tore through the region, while the Staten Island Ferry came back online two days later. Most commuter rails did not resume service for another week and the subway was not fully restored for over two weeks, though various lines had resumed service gradually.

**New York City is the third most vulnerable major American city to the impacts of climate change.** A functional post-emergency transportation system is a critical part of our preparedness. As climate change continues to fuel increasingly volatile weather patterns, New York City is likely to experience extreme weather events with greater frequency and severity, resulting in recurrent disruptions to safe and efficient transportation in New York City. The redevelopment of our city’s waterfront must be able to accommodate future high volumes of passengers and commuters as well as a contingency plan to move goods. This means not only keeping current infrastructure in a state of good repair but also expanding our shoreline’s capacity to allow for the berthing of a wide variety of vessels.

**A redundant transit system is a resilient transit system.** These weeks after Sandy reminded us that, in spite of the MTA’s remarkable capacity to revive our flooded transit system, ferries are the mode of transit naturally most resilient to extreme flooding. And, owing to the critical transit redundancy they provide, they managed to get parts of the region moving again almost seamlessly. Ferry service brought a lifeline to the Rockaway peninsula, devastated by the storm, and provided a link to job centers in Manhattan during extended A train service outage. This year, when G train service was suspended in Greenpoint and Long Island City, the East River Ferry provided additional relief for thousands of commuters.

**As the de Blasio administration considers a plan for a citywide ferry network,** expanding year-round ferry service—in addition to providing a quick, comfortable, and scenic commute—will arm the city for emergency situations, both evacuating those in need from inaccessible neighborhoods, and providing uninterrupted service in the absence of other transportation options. While the City must be commended for responding to transit paralysis with new ferry service, imagine if these routes had already existed: rather than taking time to secure FEMA funding, plan new routes, and construct temporary landings—an interconnected, five-borough ferry network could have provided virtually uninterrupted transit service to residents across the city.
Coordinated oversight is not unprecedented. In California’s Bay Area, the Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA) was established to unify all regional ferry service. Spurred by the threat of earthquakes, and supported with dedicated revenue from bridge surcharges, WETA now operates as San Francisco Bay Ferry, and is authorized by the State of California to operate a “comprehensive San Francisco Bay Area public water transit system.” This consolidation has helped the region not only improve service and coordinate better inter-modal and upland connections, but also strengthen emergency response plans. And generation ago, one massive city agency, the Department of Ports and Terminals was in charge of the maintenance of the docks and bulkheads of much of our shores. Now these responsibilities have been balkanized across more than a dozen agencies. A Department of the Waterfront—a new city agency—with a Waterfront Emergency Management division would be best equipped to coordinate maintenance issues as well as long-term planning and preparedness efforts.

We cannot wait until disaster strikes again. Ferries can and should be seamlessly integrated into the region’s mass transit system. We must work now to deepen our ties between the ferry network and the city’s rail and road transit systems. The good news is that the most critical infrastructure, the water, is in abundance. These “Blue Highways” are attractive because they are provided by nature, and do not require costly capital investment, to dig tunnels, lay tracks or build bridges. As we continue to re-engage with all the cultural and economic benefits the waterways that surround us can offer, we urge this Committee and the City Council to look to the Blue Highways as a vital component of our emergency preparedness.